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ABSTRACT

This booklet looks at the role of learner feedback in the quality improvement process. It suggests how adult and community learning (ACL) providers can adapt and improve their practice to meet the needs of learners in the changed policy context. Chapter 1 explores why providers should listen to learners and finds that listening to learners improves the service provided and, in so doing, the requirements of funding agencies and inspectorates are met. Chapter 2 identifies who the learner is. Findings are to consider what is meant by "learner" and "customer" in the context of the service; decide who to involve and prioritize groups; gather evidence about the process and how it is applied; and link target groups to inspection or quality frameworks as soon as possible. Chapter 3 reports that to listen to learners effectively, one must be specific about what one wants to know; this increased focus should be applied across all stages of the process; and listening to learners is about increasing both the quality and scope of provision. Chapter 4 on approaches or tools to use lists some methods most relevant to ACL, with analysis of their advantages and disadvantages. Chapter 5 emphasizes that the process of listening to learners needs to involve, and be owned by, these contributors: staff, learners, and the wider community. Appendixes include descriptions of listening frameworks, 14 references, 4 guides on consultation, and 4 Web sites. (YLB)

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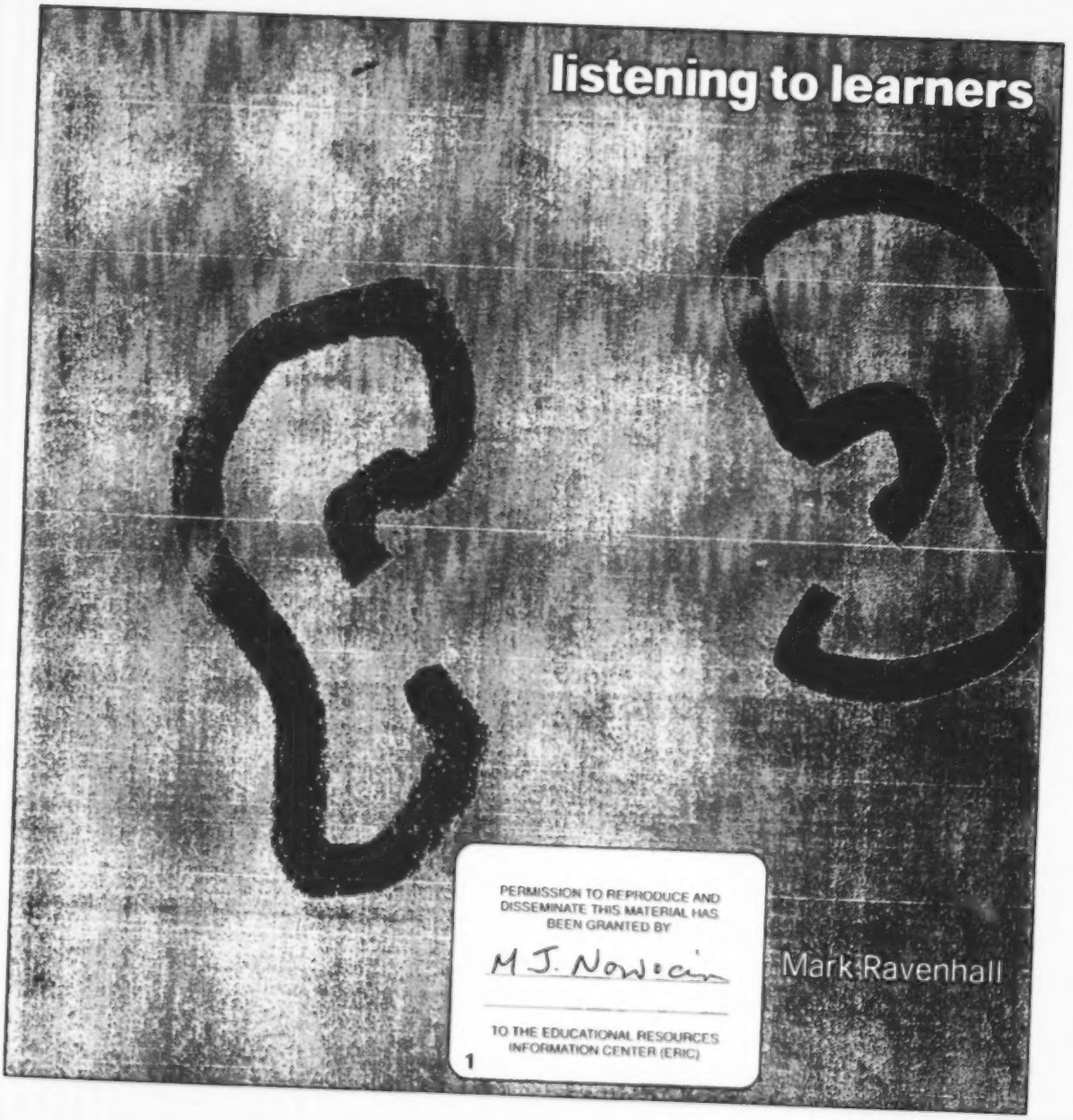
THE NATIONAL ORGANISATION FOR ADULT LEARNING

learning and skills development agency

listening to learners



Mark Ravenhall

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adult and community learning
quality support programme

A 3-year programme to support ACL providers to meet quality requirements of inspection and funding agencies and improve their provision. It is run by the Learning and Skills Development Agency (LSDA) in partnership with the National Institute of Adult and Continuing Education (NIACE) and is funded by the Department for Education and Skills (DfES). The programme includes an advice and information service, a website, quality improvement networks, staff development workshops and consultancy, development projects and case studies. Details of the programme, extra copies of this guide and back-up materials are available on the website www.qualityACL.org.uk

Further guides and workshops are planned on:

- equal opportunities
- involving part-time staff in the quality agenda
- fit-for-purpose systems for small providers
- measuring achievement in non-accredited learning

listening to learners

Mark Ravenhall

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Contents

	Introduction	1
	Why listen to learners?	3
	Who is the 'learner'?	9
	Listening effectively	17
	Different approaches to use	29
	Involving staff, learners and the community	45
Appendix	Listening frameworks	49
	References	51
	Further information	52

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Mark Ravenhall, a Development Officer at NIACE, has over 15 years' experience as a teacher and trainer of adults. He helps coordinate support for local authorities involved in adult community learning, with particular reference to quality improvement and staff development. Mark is currently working on a 3-year programme with the Learning and Skills Development Agency to provide quality support for local authority providers of adult and community learning.

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Introduction

Ask adult and community learning (ACL) practitioners why they should listen to learners, and they might say:

- the quality of the learning programme is enhanced when learners are involved
- funders and inspectorates demand it
- it helps develop new courses
- it heads off serious complaints
- it identifies new markets
- it helps widen participation
- it improves retention
- it is integral to the process of teaching and learning.

Whether practitioners are specialists in basic skills, outreach, or working with people with disabilities or other forms of disadvantage, listening to learners is fundamental to their work.

Listening to learners is high on the post-16 raising standards agenda. This booklet looks at the role of learner feedback in the quality improvement process. It suggests how ACL providers can adapt and improve their practice to meet the needs of learners in the changed policy context.

The focus here is on local authority ACL. Therefore, much of the material draws on, and is influenced by, other quality assurance issues in local government, particularly 'Best Value'.

The term 'provider' is used throughout this booklet to refer to an organisation that makes provision directly and/or through contracts with others.

Why listen to learners?

Policy and practice

The focus of policy and practice should be learners themselves and the quality and range of learning opportunities made available to them. Fryer 1997, 29

Recent government policy has attempted to provide a framework in which best practice in adult and community learning (ACL) becomes the norm. Publications and discussion papers from government, funding agencies and inspectorates have a common theme: that the learner is central to the quality improvement process.

For this government, ACL policy is no different from policy in other areas of public service: the Local Government Act, based on the Modernising Local Government White Paper (1999), established common quality assurance processes within the context of 'Best Value'.

'Best Value' is a system whereby public sector bodies have a 'duty to deliver services to clear standards (quality and cost) by the most effective, efficient and economical means available, taking full account of equalities and environmental factors' (Cox 2001, 6).

Best Value Review is a process applying to all local authorities. There are four elements:

- consultation (consulting with the local community, as well as with learners)
- comparison (benchmarking against other ACL providers)
- competition (checking how responsive the service is to the local market)
- challenge (considering alternative or innovative ways to deliver the service).

Best Value is the single most important framework by which to judge the success of ACL providers within the local authority context. It is the only quality model to be named in the Common Inspection Framework (CIF), the document that sets out the principles applicable to the inspections of post-16 non-higher education under part III of the Learning and Skills Act 2000.

Defining 'consultation'

For many people, consultation means public meetings, talking to interested groups, and perhaps leaflets to all households. A broader view is taken here, to include all forms of communication, 'dialogue' and involvement: giving information, finding out about people and what they think, and involving them directly in decision making. www.idea.gov.uk/bestvalue/consult

So consultation in local government is much closer to the concept of 'learner involvement' than 'learner feedback'. The concept of involving learners (and others) in all aspects of the service that affects them is reflected in government publications on quality in ACL.

Putting learners at the heart of the system

The Fryer Report (1997, 25) used the phrase 'putting learners at the centre' of the learning process. This was not only about learners taking responsibility and having ownership of their own learning journeys, but also about widening participation in adult learning. Best practice has shown that listening to current learners helps to formulate strategies for engaging non-participants (McGivney 2000, 9).

In terms of the quality improvement agenda, *Raising standards in post-16 learning* refers to 'placing the learner at the heart of the system' (DfEE March 2001, 10). In practice this means that:

- ACL providers need to engage with learners as a key element of their quality improvement strategy and to show that they have done so effectively
- local and national learning and skills councils will engage with learners as a key element of their quality improvement strategy (LSC 2001, 3)
- inspectorates will engage with learners as part of the inspection process.

Later in this booklet, we will look at how ACL providers can engage with learners effectively (see 'Listening effectively', page 17).

Self-assessment

The process of self-assessment is not new to ACL providers. For example, adult education services in local authorities are familiar with the practice of ongoing evaluation, monitoring and review at a variety of organisational levels – authority-wide, whole service, institution, centre, course and individual. However, this process needs to be distilled into a new format. This format will influence the processes involved.

Central to the inspection process and the format of the inspection reports are the seven key questions underpinning the Common Inspection Framework:

1 How well do learners achieve?
2 How effective are teaching, training and learning?
3 How are achievement and learning affected by resources?
4 How effective are the assessment and monitoring of learners' progress?
5 How well do the programmes and courses meet the needs and interest of learners?
6 How well are learners guided and supported?
7 How effective are leadership and management in raising achievement and supporting all learners?

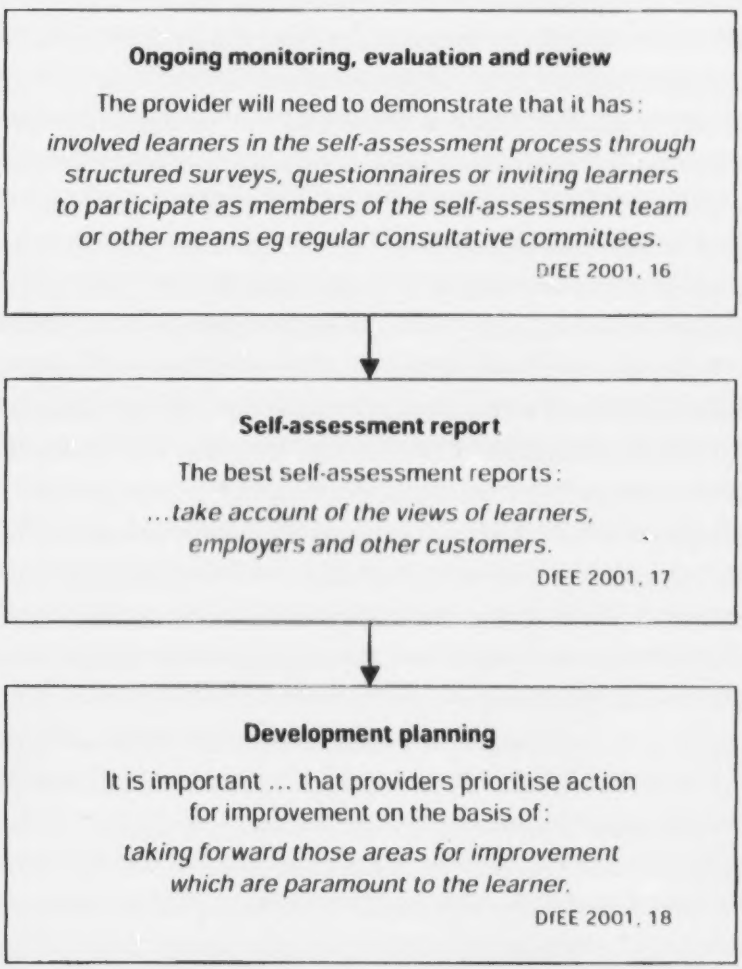
Draft guidance on what these questions mean in the context of ACL has been published by the Adult Learning Inspectorate. The guidance identifies how listening to learners can assist ACL providers in answering these questions. For example, in terms of leadership and management (question 7), providers will be required to:

- *ensure all learners receive a statement of their* ***Learning Entitlement*** *and understand their responsibilities as learners ... (arrangements for receiving feedback, including complaints, from learners and customers will be established for both the LSC* [Learning and Skills Council] *and providers)*
- *have effective systems for gathering feedback, including customer surveys,* ***learner satisfaction surveys*** *and* ***leaver surveys*** *and act upon the feedback to make improvements*
- *demonstrate financial probity and value for money by ...* ***gathering feedback from customers, learners and employers,*** *to ascertain that they are providing value for money.*

DfEE 2001, 13–14

The following diagram outlines the process of self-assessment. It shows where the guidance about involving the learner has an impact on the process.

Listening to learners in the self-assessment process


Ongoing monitoring, evaluation and review
The provider will need to demonstrate that it has:
involved learners in the self-assessment process through structured surveys, questionnaires or inviting learners to participate as members of the self-assessment team or other means eg regular consultative committees.
DfEE 2001, 16
Self-assessment report
The best self-assessment reports:
...take account of the views of learners, employers and other customers.
DfEE 2001, 17
Development planning
It is important ... that providers prioritise action for improvement on the basis of:
taking forward those areas for improvement which are paramount to the learner.
DfEE 2001, 18

Summary

Listen to learners to improve the service provided to them and to others. In doing so, and in approaching the process in a certain way, we will better meet the requirements of funding agencies and inspectorates.

Key points

1. **One of the central thrusts of government policy is that people have a right to comment on and influence public services.**
2. **The learner is central to the quality improvement process in adult community learning.**
3. **Involve the learner in the planning and development of services and not just in giving feedback on provision.**
4. **Present evidence of the learner's involvement.**
5. **Funders and inspectors also seek to engage directly with learners.**
6. **Learner involvement should lead to action.**

Who is the 'learner'?

Who should ACL providers involve in their quality improvement processes?

The Best Value process differentiates between 'customers' and 'beneficiaries'. The table below (adapted from Best Value consultation guidance prepared by the Improvement and Development Agency) provides a useful framework against which ACL providers can make judgements about who should be involved in their self-assessment processes.

Best Value review: who to consult

Customers

- *Current users of the service*
  - *Paid for at point of service delivery*
  - *Paid for indirectly*

Consumers of 'collective goods' (eg parks, clean air)

- *Non-users of the service*
  - *Dissatisfied – tried and gone away*
  - *Not heard about it*
  - *Not yet appropriate (eg 'what would you expect from an ACL service if you did use it?')*
  - *'Denied customers' – those who want to use services but are not allowed to or are unable to access them*
- *Internal customers for services provided by one part of the council for another*

Beneficiaries of services

- *Eg parents or employers as the beneficiaries of the education system*

Other stakeholders

- *Others involved in providing services, eg carers or council officers*
- *Citizens in their role as electors, council tax payers and residents*

Proxy consultees

- *Those speaking on behalf of others, eg on behalf of very young children. This ensures the inclusion of those for whom traditional consultation is hard, eg students with learning difficulties.*

www.ideabestvalue.net

Your immediate priority may be attaining current learners' involvement through feedback, but you can also gain a wider perspective on the quality of your service and how it may be improved.

Customers and learners

The importance of a 'satisfied customer' is regarded as central to success in both the private and public sectors. This is not merely so that existing 'customers' continue to buy the 'product', but so that the product itself is improved and more people buy it or it appeals to new markets.

The 'customers' of adult community learning are:

- external funders (agencies with whom you have a contract)
- internal funders (another part of your organisation, which funds you)
- the general public (who expect a service to be available, even if they do not use it)
- local communities and employers (and their representatives)
- your staff (who invest time and energy in your work)
- priority or target groups of learners (who may or may not attend)
- your current learners (on learning programmes).

Who to involve

In considering who to involve in the quality improvement process, think about who your services affect most directly.

You may decide that your ACL provision has most impact on your current learners and that the majority of your funding is aimed at teaching and learning interactions. If so, prioritise the involvement of current learners.

However, focusing solely on current learners to the exclusion of other 'customers', 'beneficiaries', 'stakeholders' or 'proxy consultees' would not meet the requirements of self-assessment. Some of these 'service users' may not be current learners (eg non-returners or non-completers) or they may be 'potential learners' from target groups.

In each case, seek feedback on specific issues (eg reasons for non-completion) and on general issues (eg accessibility or perceived barriers to learning).

Case study Service users who are not current learners

- Rod rang the service to find out about the nearest Level 3 German course to his workplace. He was given impartial information and advice that allowed him to choose a suitable programme offered by another organisation.
- Leila is the full-time carer of Hasim, an adult with a learning disability, who attends one of the service's self-advocacy courses.
- Esme runs a small voluntary organisation. She has encouraged and supported several members of her team to attend literacy and numeracy courses run by the service.

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Grouping and prioritising

Before planning the design or implementation of learner feedback mechanisms, consider the target audience and the purpose of seeking feedback from them.

You may find it useful to group people from whom you want to obtain feedback so that you can target methods accordingly and so that you consult a wide cross-section of people.

It is useful to look at four groups: current learners; previous learners; potential learners; and other service users. Within each group, sub-groups can be identified to increase the sophistication of targeting and general planning. (This could be regarded as evidence under the 'leadership and management' strand of the Common Inspection Framework, see page 6.) It is possible for an individual to be a member of more than one group.

Current learners:

- in programme areas
- who have a disability or a learning difficulty
- from ethnic minority groups
- on different sites
- in smaller community venues
- for whom English is not a first language
- who had a pre-course interview
- who attended an open day.

Previous learners:

- in programme areas
- who have a disability or a learning difficulty
- from ethnic minority groups
- on different sites
- in smaller community venues
- for whom English is not a first language
- who had a pre-course interview
- who responded to a 'drop-out letter' from their tutor
- who left for known reasons
- who left for unknown reasons
- who attended one session only.

Potential learners:

- for programme areas
- who have a disability or a learning difficulty
- in six target wards
- for whom English is not a first language
- who had a pre-course interview
- who attended an open day
- who attended 'taster' sessions
- from ethnic minority groups
- who are older people.

Other service users:

- who are parents or carers of learners in programme areas
- who are advocates of adults who have learning difficulties
- who provide complementary services in health or social care
- who are employers of current learners
- who are employers of previous learners
- who are employers of potential learners
- who represent target groups of learners.

Grouping is a cost-effective way of managing the feedback process, ensuring that all learners are consulted at some stage. Targeting is more inclusive than a random 'scattergun' approach.

Summary

Be proactive about why you want to involve learners and how. Target resources to gather evidence for the process and results of listening to learners.

Key points

1. **Consider what you mean by 'learner' and 'customer' in the context of your own service.**
2. **Decide who to involve and prioritise groups.**
3. **Gather evidence about the process (eg targeting or sampling) and how it is applied.**
4. **Link target groups to inspection or quality frameworks as soon as possible.**

Listening effectively

Why use frameworks?

Listening to learners is not an end in itself. In terms of both proving and improving what ACL services do, it provides essential evidence of rigour in the self-assessment process and in the provision itself. It also enhances the scope and quality of the service. Many providers adopt external quality frameworks that meet the needs of the whole organisation, even though only a part of their work may be in ACL.

Providers have chosen frameworks because they provide quality criteria against which the whole organisation can judge or measure itself. Using these quality criteria, actual performance information can be gathered and then acted upon for quality improvement. Once certain criteria are established, it is easier to define levels of performance – norms, strengths and weaknesses – and set targets for improvement (see Dixon and Moorse 1998, 3).

Off-the-shelf quality frameworks are useful as they provide consistent standards against which to judge performance. In addition, good practice can be shared, both in terms of performance and the way that it is measured.

What frameworks are there?

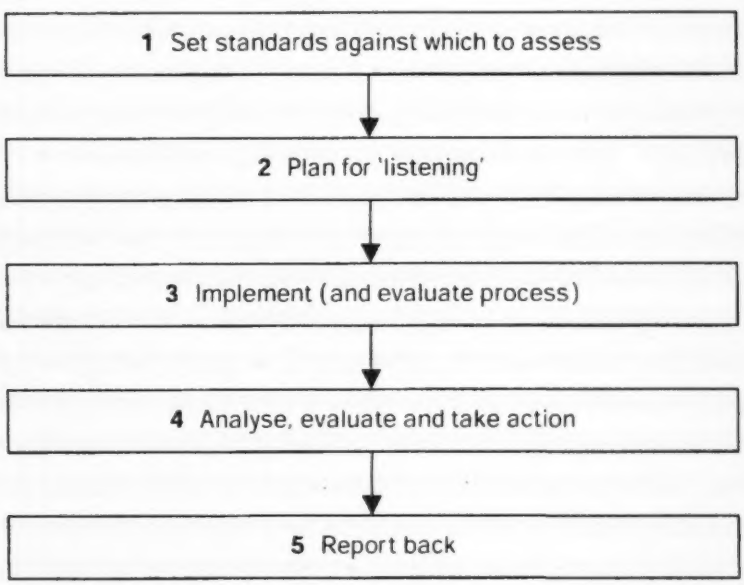
Appendix 1 summarises what is available.

Being specific

Frameworks are generally felt to be useful because they help translate a **quality policy** into **quality improvement** practice. But to be effective any framework, system, manual or handbook has to enable you to focus specifically on what you need to know in order to improve. Use general quality criteria to define what good practice means to you and develop your own set of quality standards against which to assess the quality of your service.

Providers using existing quality frameworks will be adapting their practice in the light of the Common Inspection Framework and subsequent guidance.

For listening to learners to have a purpose and result in action, the following five-step sequence is important:


1 Set standards against which to assess
2 Plan for 'listening'
3 Implement (and evaluate process)
4 Analyse, evaluate and take action
5 Report back

Feedback

The most effective frameworks 'complete the loop' of the listening process by reporting back to those who took part in the consultation. Feedback is important, even if you have not taken action as a result of the listening consultation; the essential thing is to have listened. There may be good reasons why you have not taken action and you should explain these. Besides, people are more willing to give feedback a second time if they know it was effective the first time.

Setting standards

Some providers use a student charter or statement of learner entitlement against which to measure themselves. These are likely to follow the Common Inspection Framework or other quality frameworks that the provider is using, but sometimes their content or presentation is adapted to suit the target audience of learners.

An example of good practice is the *Our right to learn* charter for adults with learning difficulties (Jacobson 2000).

See also the Adult Learning Inspectorate's adaptation of question 5 of the Common Inspection Framework, below: *How well do the programmes and courses meet the needs and interest of learners?*

Common Inspection Framework	***In adult and community learning this means:***
Learners have the opportunity to study an appropriate range of courses or programmes, and, where appropriate, achieve suitable qualifications	*also, the timing of courses is designed to fit with adults' other commitments eg shift working, carer responsibilities*

Adult Learning Inspectorate February 2001, 68

Now plan to listen to learners to find out whether your service is meeting this standard.

Planning to listen

Ask yourselves three questions:

- What do we need to know?
- Whom do we need to involve?
- How do we go about it?

What do we need to know?

- ☐ Do existing learners think courses fit in with other commitments?
- ☐ Were people who enquired but did not join put off by the timing of courses?
- ☐ Do potential learners think timing is an issue?
- ☐ Did previous learners drop out because of the timing of courses?
- ☐ Would 'basic skills in the workplace' learners have attended a course outside the workplace?
- ☐ Did carers of learners find the timing of courses suitable?

Whom do we need to involve?

- ☐ A sample of, or all, current learners?
- ☐ A sample of, or all, enquirers?
- ☐ A sample of potential learners?
- ☐ All previous learners who have dropped out?
- ☐ A sample of, or all, basic skills in the workplace learners?
- ☐ A sample of, or all, carers of learners?

How do we go about it?

- ☐ Clarify what is meant by adherence to the standard.
- ☐ Plan how to measure responses.
- ☐ Decide how to sample.
- ☐ Combine questions across a number of possible tools.
- ☐ Select the best tools.
- ☐ Adapt tools for specific target groups.
- ☐ Pilot new tools and amend them if necessary.

Good planning is about making the best use of resources: financial resources, the provider's time and the learner's time. Any evidence-gathering should also be 'fit for the purpose' of improving the quality of the service. Benefits must outweigh costs. Before implementing a plan, be clear about what you want from the activity, which target group it is aimed at and the methodologies or approaches to be used.

Implementing

Taking the single issue of course timing as an example, the table below describes possible approaches for obtaining learners' (and others') views. In reality, this issue would be assessed at the same time as associated quality criteria, such as:

- *accommodation provides a suitable setting for good teaching, training & learning and support for learners (CIF 3)*
- *programmes of work take account of community & employer needs (CIF 5)*
- *impartial guidance enables learners to choose the course or programme which is right for them (CIF 6)*
- *individual learning needs are accurately diagnosed & learners receive effective additional support throughout their studies or training (CIF 6)*
- *learners have effective personal support to help them to complete their course or programme, including access to specialist support services (CIF 6).*

Combining these questions makes more efficient use of resources and recognises the complexity of learner motivation by allowing learners (and others) to respond on a number of interlinked issues.

Case study Assessing course timing

Action taken	Resources used
Question added to the whole-service 'welcome survey' of learners, given to them at their first course	Few additional resources – the additional question needs to be filled out by learners and then analysed by a member of staff
Question added to information and advice survey for a sample of all enquirers. Respondents asked if they would be willing to be interviewed further by telephone	Few additional resources – the additional question needs to be filled out by learners and then analysed by a member of staff
Short, semi-structured telephone interview with small sample of respondents above on a number of issues, including course timing	▫ Development time ▫ Staff training on interview techniques ▫ Piloting time ▫ Staff time (alongside existing duties) ▫ Analysis and reporting time
Focus group on course timing established at main centre	▫ Development time ▫ Staff development on running focus groups ▫ Training for learners on running focus groups (alternative) ▫ Targeting, recruitment and selection time and advertising cost ▫ Staff time ▫ Refreshments and expenses ▫ Analysis and reporting time ▫ Room hire

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Action taken	Resources used
Question raised at community consultation meetings or any external partnership meetings that members of the service attend	▫ Development time for a common format for question ▫ Briefing for all who are going to ask the question ▫ Time to analyse responses and report back to the group
Question added to 'drop out' questionnaire, letter and follow-up telephone call	The current system of following up non-attendance may have needed revising anyway
Session during basic skills in the workplace courses on 'motivation for doing this course'	▫ Curriculum leadership time ▫ Teaching and learning time ▫ Reporting back time
Advertisement or editorial placed in a newsletter for carers, advising service's free-call internet-based feedback site	Assumes feedback site already established. If not, development costs £3000 and ongoing costs £800 per year. Staff or volunteer time to monitor and report. Some council sites will already have this facility and staffing. Cost: liaison time

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Analysing, evaluating and taking action

The more complex the means of gathering feedback, the harder the task of analysis. Working to national and external quality frameworks increases the number of factors to be considered. The data must be evaluated: what does it say, and how?

The way the data presents will allow you to learn how effectively you are consulting with learners. This in turn meets the requirements of the Common Inspection Framework:

- *The 'best value' principles of comparison, challenge, consultation & competition are applied in securing resources & services (CIF 7).*
- *The quality assurance arrangements are systematic & informed by the views of all interested parties (CIF 7).*

Once all the data is collected, it can lead to action on the provision of services to learners and potential learners. It can also influence how the quality assurance process is managed and how learners are involved.

Case study Two of the lessons from consultation exercise are that:

- learners, non-learners, community groups and carers think there is not enough one-off, one-day weekend provision of basic skills workshops and 'Towards Independence' sessions for adults with learning difficulties
- communication with, and in particular getting the views of, adults with learning difficulties is problematical; it is unclear whether the service is getting the adults' own views or those of interested parties.

A development plan is drawn up:

Action	Outcome/target
Further Saturday school provision will be developed	▫ 10 Saturday courses developed in year 1 ▫ 60 students attend these, 50% not being current learners
A charter for working with adults with learning difficulties will be developed to include 'the learner's voice'	▫ Existing good practice is researched and summarised ▫ Learners are consulted on a draft pack and processes ▫ Training is provided ▫ Standards are developed and published

Try writing success criteria related to these actions in terms of their impact on learners (see Kenway and Reisenberger 2001, 34).

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Reporting back

The success of the next cycle of listening to learners will depend on the quality of reporting back this time. Learners are more likely to respond next time if they have received feedback on how their views have been used. It is important to provide feedback on:

- what learners' views were and how many shared those views
- what you are going to do about it and when
- what you are not able to do and why.

You can use many ways of feeding back to learners and the wider community:

- student handbooks or diaries
- brochures or prospectuses
- open days or enrolment sessions
- circulars or newsletters
- briefings or minutes to meetings
- reports to official committees and partners
- open forums and websites
- advertisements and editorials in the press
- informal class or breaktime visits
- roadshows
- tutor-led communication.

Investing in the future

Learner feedback is not just about proving and improving the quality of existing provision. It is a method of extending the scope of ACL. If you are to engage with potential learners, particularly those who are most difficult to reach, you need to engage with them on their own terms.

'We thought it would be like school, we didn't think we'd be treated as adults or that people would listen to us,' is a familiar refrain.

Learner involvement is an essential component of outreach provision that starts with listening to the group's needs and leads to the design of the learning programme.

Summary

To listen to learners effectively, you must be specific about what you want to know. Apply this increased focus across all stages of the process. Listening to learners is about increasing both the quality and the scope of provision.

Key points

1. **The process of thinking about listening to learners allows you to focus on what you want from it.**
2. **Bear in mind the end of the process: reporting back to learners.**
3. **Set standards and plan carefully how to measure them.**
4. **Use a range of tools.**
5. **Use the analysis as a basis for reflection and development planning.**
6. **Learners' views are integral to the curriculum development process.**
7. **Listening helps develop curricula that are appropriate to the needs of current non-participants.**

Different approaches to use

Deciding which approaches, or tools, to use will depend on what you want to find out. A tool that is good for one job may be useless for another, perhaps excellent in terms of potential results but too cumbersome and too expensive, ie not 'fit for purpose'.

The Improvement and Development Agency (IdeA) Best Value website (www.ideabestvalue.net) lists over 100 methods of consultation. Some of the methods most relevant to ACL are listed below, with an analysis of their advantages and disadvantages.

A range of tools

Questionnaires and surveys

Questionnaires and surveys can be conducted by post, by telephone or face-to-face. Their scope and impact depend on many factors: numbers reached, the nature of the questions, whether they are conducted by interviewers or by self-completion.

The most common approach for ACL providers is to survey 'student satisfaction' using the Audit Commission performance indicator K16, although this is not a compulsory Best Value indicator. This is unlikely to be sufficient for the current inspection and self-assessment processes.

Surveys tend to be handed out by tutors and returned either via the tutor or using a pre-paid envelope or postcard. The returns are then collated and analysed centrally, as opposed to being dealt with at each centre (involving some coding of response sheets if the questionnaire is anonymous).

This allows comparisons to be made by centre or by curriculum area. One authority has tried giving two questionnaires to each student, one being aimed at a friend who is not a current learner. This personal approach elicited a higher response rate than previous surveys.

The challenge lies in making the document as focused, easy to use and clear as possible. If there is any ambiguity in the questions, then results are skewed. This model also depends on the skills and engagement of the front-line staff encouraging the participants to fill in the form. Again, results may be skewed or response rates affected by how the questionnaire is presented to learners.

For some groups of learners, such as those with learning difficulties, use of a standard form may need to be facilitated by a member of staff or an advocate. The advocacy role is considered to be the more robust approach, closer to the learner's own views. Similarly, beneficiaries other than the learner, such as a parent or day care provider, should be surveyed separately. Do not assume that beneficiaries' views necessarily reflect those of the learners.

A questionnaire is often used at the beginning (in a 'Welcome survey') or end of the programme of study. One of the criticisms learners have of this system is that their ideas tend to 'go into a great black hole'; they do not know how their feedback was used. It is useful therefore to state on the form what the impact of the questionnaire will be and when you will report back on results.

Non-standardised approaches aimed at specific target groups may be used alongside the survey, but it is also useful to present all learners with the same questions. In such cases you may need to amend forms, using language and cultural styles accessible to the learner.

Advantages
Questionnaires and surveys

- reach large numbers comparatively inexpensively
- involve all learners who use the service
- provide useful comparative information by centre or curriculum area
- are specific and quantifiable
- can be used to benchmark over time and with results elsewhere
- are regarded as inclusive if on a large scale.

Disadvantages
Questionnaires and surveys

- can contain unreliable questions
- do not allow for two-way dialogue
- do not allow for discussion or deliberation, so are not useful in areas where respondents are are unlikely to be well informed
- can be regarded by learners as a one-way process.

Comments, suggestions and complaints schemes

These include comments postcards or suggestion boxes located in the reception area or in classrooms. You need systems for ensuring that comments or complaints are dealt with systematically and recorded, so lessons can be learnt. See *Consultancy for Free* (Owen 2001) for detailed guidance on this aspect of listening to learners.

Feed back to learners any actions taken as a result of their suggestions (unless they are anonymous). A good, well-publicised complaints scheme should encourage complaints; the number of complaints received should not be used as an indicator of success.

Advantages
Comments, suggestions and complaints schemes

- can result in greater satisfaction for compainants if they are dealt with properly
- can be a source of new ideas and creative solutions.

Disadvantages
Comments, suggestions and complaints schemes

- may be unrepresentative
- disadvantage learners who have difficulty with reading or with the language used
- only work within a culture that encourages feedback.

Invitations for written inputs

General requests for comments from the public or from learners can be made through local authority newspapers or leaflets, either of limited coverage or sent to all households. Requests may simply consist of a couple of open or closed questions, linked to a competition for a free course.

This approach gives everyone the chance to have their say. Responses take into account information given in the leaflet, so participants can be more informed and are able to comment specifically and in more detail. Some providers include a 'have your say' section in their course brochures.

Advantages
Invitations for written inputs

- are inclusive
- show people that you are listening
- positively affect the perception of your institution and its reputation
- are relatively cheap if the local authority newspaper is used.

Disadvantages
Invitations for written inputs

- are not totally objective
- may be difficult to analyse where open-ended questions are used (rather than 'tick boxes')
- may result in a large number of responses.

Course-related tools

Various standard quality assessment approaches are applied systematically: learners are asked to keep diaries of their learning experiences; tutors' lesson plans may include a learners' views prompt in their evaluation section; non-attendance may trigger a letter to the learner; leavers may be invited to attend an exit interview.

Advantages Course-related tools	**Disadvantages** Course-related tools
▪ are linked to the learning process, as opposed to external to it ▪ provide precise and detailed information ▪ measure changes in perception over time ▪ are useful for checking specific questions, eg ease of finding facilities, treatment by staff, quality of learning materials and communication ▪ in addition, learner diaries illustrate real experiences at point of use.	▪ are perceived as taking up 'valuable class time' unless directly linked to the learning process ▪ require staff development on how to 'capture the feedback' from a range of sources ▪ are perceived to impose on tutor time ▪ in addition, learner diaries may not be representative, particularly if only used in specific classes

Informal contacts

Informal conversations with learners and others during classrooms visits, break-times or open days can be recorded as part of normal activity. Formal sampling may then take place, for example looking at how learners perceive health and safety issues. This can be recorded in the same way as an audit of telephone enquiries, with a standard form for each participating staff member.

Advantages Informed contacts	**Disadvantages** Informed contacts
▫ demonstrate genuine listening ▫ are a good way of introducing and exploring ideas which can then be followed up and tested more systematically ▫ can be integrated into existing practices.	▫ require effort to record results systematically ▫ risk bias as to who is listened to and which comments are accepted, remembered and recorded ▫ require additional time for setting up systems, recording and analysing.

Observation

This involves observation of the whole service, as distinct from the observation of teaching and learning. For example, observing how people use a reception desk or counting numbers of potential learners taking course information sheets. Direct observation, shadowing, cameras or closed circuit television can be used. Think through and establish openly the principles of observation, particularly when observing people's work behaviour. Staff should be consulted before the programme is introduced.

Advantages Observation	**Disadvantages** Observation
▫ provides an accurate record of people's behaviour, as opposed to what they say they will do ▫ can be integrated into existing practices.	▫ does not record how people feel and think about the service ▫ may involve some (probably unconscious) observer bias ▫ people may not act naturally if they know they are being observed.

Telephone polling

Telephone polling can be carried out very quickly, using a short form that can be used for follow-up surveys. For example, a brief call could be made to those who enquired but did not enrol.

Advantages Telephone polling	**Disadvantages** Telephone polling
▫ can be cheaper than surveys, due to lower refusal rate ▫ has the benefit of personal contact without the intimacy of being face-to-face.	▫ excludes those without a telephone, who may already be among the more disadvantaged ▫ can be expensive in staff training as this is a skilled activity.

Citizens' Panels

Many local authorities now use Citizens' Panels. These are authority-wide panels of 1000–2000 community representatives, surveyed several times a year, usually by post or telephone. You could approach your local authority about adding questions to their survey. Whole panels or sub-groups can also be used for deliberative workshops or as focus groups. Using the same Panel a number of times reduces recruitment costs.

Advantages Citizens' Panels	**Disadvantages** Citizens' Panels
▫ reduce recruitment costs if the same panel is used a number of times (since people agree to be on the panel) and should increase response rates, as the panel is a captive audience ▫ may allow for some measurement of changes over time as the same group is being used ▫ should be cheaper than an equivalent one-off survey.	▫ may be unrepresentative as people on the panel become more knowledgeable ▫ may reduce validity of tracking over time if there is a high turnover of panel members ▫ involve varying costs; they depend on size of panel, means of recruiting, method of polling, whether costs are shared with other agencies.

Public meetings

These one-off forums allow small-group discussions and feedback through oral reports and anonymous, informal comments on post-it notes and flipcharts. Consider carefully how to promote the event.

Advantages
Public meetings

- allow those present to set or influence the agenda
- give a large number of people the chance to have their say, to explain and to supply information
- have the potential for informed discussion and hearing the views of a large number of people
- show that the provider is listening
- may be reported widely in local media, reaching those who do not attend.

Disadvantages
Public meetings

- can involve problems of unpredictable take-up and cost-effectiveness
- need wide publicity to make them worthwhile and careful timetabling to avoid competition with other leisure activities.

Forums and interest groups

Area and neighbourhood forums involve learners (and others) in a particular location. They may focus on issues wider than the learning community. Membership may be restricted or open to the public. A budget may be devolved to the forum. The agenda may be set in advance or formulated at the time, according to participant concerns.

Interest groups or specialist groups are useful for detailed and specific feedback relating to particular aspects of ACL provision. This includes regular consultation with existing bodies, including parish councils, professional bodies, advocacy groups, ethnic minority groups, voluntary and advice-giving bodies, civic societies, sports and leisure societies and other stakeholders. Groups raise issues for providers to address, rather than suggesting immediate solutions themselves.

Advantages Forums and interest groups	**Disadvantages** Forums and interest groups
▫ reach people in their own areas and address specific local concerns ▫ relate to natural communities ▫ are relatively cheap because groups already exist and have an in-depth knowledge of their own community, including hard-to-reach groups.	▫ may involve a significant budget for a small area; it needs careful cost-benefit analysis and commitment to keep the forum going ▫ may not be representative of the community and are unlikely to represent non-users ▫ involve high costs if the group is specially established by the ACL service.

Focus groups

Focus groups explore issues through structured but open-ended discussion by a group of around 10 people, representative of a particular sector, led by a trained facilitator. Facilitation is skilled work, requiring either staff training or induction, or the use of external consultants. Some providers train groups of learners (eg older people) to carry out this work.

Focus groups can be deliberative: they may learn about, advise and even vote on a particular issue. Some providers have consulted focus groups about the layout of their brochure, student handbook or prospectus; others to inform the development of a curriculum area such as basic skills provision.

Advantages Focus groups	**Disadvantages** Focus groups
▫ are good for issues that need an in-depth, qualitative review ▫ are useful for generating questions for quantitative analysis, or in order to analyse and explain issues after quantitative survey ▫ are effective in assessing reaction to proposed changes ▫ avoid just hearing the 'loudest voices' ▫ assist targeting, as they can focus on sections of the community previously excluded ▫ allow ideas through group discussion to be built on and new directions taken, rather than following a single individual's view or preset questions.	▫ cannot be guaranteed to be statistically representative of the whole community ▫ may need to be repeated to cover all target groups or a range of issues ▫ can be expensive in terms of training or the use of external consultants ▫ require skilled facilitation.

Exhibitions, roadshows and open days

Take the opportunity to listen, as well as to give out information. Collect information through self-completion questionnaires, comments cards, questions asked by interviewers or members or staff, informal discussions (with main points noted), or through comments on 'post-it' notes (which can then be grouped by theme). Use display boards, models, written material and video to present your information effectively.

Consider attending other agencies' open days and events, such as an Early Years Development and Childcare Partnership information session on childcare and playwork training opportunities. Collecting demographic information will help determine how representative the views of participants are.

Electronic communications

The internet and cable television allow interaction with the public. A number of learner forums have developed online sites run by and for learners, but accessible by anybody who has access to the internet. Check sites to ensure that they are accessible for people who have communication difficulties or other disabilities.

Video box enables the public to leave video messages; video conferencing links facilitate direct contact with staff. Opinions can also be recorded using conventional audio or video recorders.

Advantages
Electronic communications

- are relatively cheap
- involve learners in setting up and running the service
- are convenient, as access can be from own home or library
- allow provision of information, discussion and collection of views
- allow extensive documentation to be made available on the web without large printing costs, and allowing selective access
- increase accessibility of people who have limited mobility or communication difficulties or disabilities.

Disadvantages
Electronic communications

- can be regarded as 'impersonal'
- can reach only a limited number of people have access to the internet
- can lead to inaccurate results: it may be hard to verify the accuracy of respondent details (so you may get some multiple replies, or replies from outside the area)
- often involve high initial infrastructure costs, depending on baseline capability and access to whole authority systems
- usually require specialist help in designing web pages, discussion forums and analysing responses.

'Open space'

In this very flexible approach, those attending an 'open space' workshop determine issues for discussion. Individuals interested in particular issues take responsibility for leading a workshop. Participants sign up for the workshops, which are recorded for feedback at the close of the event or shortly after.

'Open space' workshops are good for addressing difficult issues involving a large number of people, particularly where there are conflicting views. This approach is characterised by flexibility, informality and individual willingness to participate. It is a good idea to get some experience of the approach before trying it out, by observing a workshop elsewhere, for example. You may find it stimulating and different. Those who would normally take responsibility for running such an event should instead be treated as 'just another participant'.

Advantages Open space	**Disadvantages** Open space
▫ is flexible, informal and empowering ▫ is good for addressing difficult issues, involving a large number of people, where there are conflicting views ▫ often results in positive reactions.	▫ requires experience and skilled organisation ▫ involves cost of an experienced organiser for the day and a large venue.

Learner nominees

Many of the methods described above may lead to the identification of learners who may be willing to work alongside staff as 'learner nominees' to assist specifically in the quality improvement process.

This approach is currently being piloted by the Adult Learning Inspectorate. Early indications are that it presents challenges to provider, inspectorate and nominee alike. But the challenge is worth undertaking because it shows a willingness to involve learners in the quality improvement process and listen to feedback from them.

Questions yet to be answered are whether the individuals chosen are representative of the diverse 'student body' in ACL, and how far they can be fully involved in, and knowledgeable of, the issues affecting the service.

Monitoring and evaluation

Consider how you will evaluate whether you have been effective in:

- choosing the right approach or tool
- applying it (within budget)
- providing evidence
- linking outcomes with planning
- feeding back outcomes to learners.

There are a number of ways of monitoring the efficiency and effectiveness of listening to learners:

- always pilot surveys and questionnaires
- establish a unit cost for the tool used, so it is comparable with other methods
- define the answers you want from the tool and measure how many you have got
- apply standards for the robustness of evidence (in terms of reliability, validity and relevance)
- get the views of learners on the listening process!

Summary

Develop a range of approaches to listen to and involve learners as part of the quality improvement process. Use a range of tools that are fit for the purpose of obtaining the information required. Monitor and evaluate this process in a way that involves learners.

Key points

1. **A learner feedback toolkit is a useful part of a quality system, demonstrating organisation and planning in your approach to quality improvement.**
2. **You need to know why you have chosen a particular tool and be able to justify it.**
3. **A tool that is useful in one context may be useless in another.**
4. **Different tools require different degrees of learner involvement.**
5. **Provide evidence of learner involvement and its results.**
6. **Evaluate the efficiency and effectiveness of the tool used.**

Involving staff, learners and the community

One of an organisation's most important assets is an intangible one: its reputation. What makes a reputation? Who 'owns' it? How can it be improved? It could be argued that a provider's reputation resides with its 'customers': staff, learners and the community. All of these are involved in the process of listening to learners. This chapter explains how.

Staff

It is important that staff at all levels 'own' the quality improvement system and are clear about their role in it. This can only be achieved through clear communication and staff development. One approach is to have a staff charter, making it clear what staff can expect from the process.

Some quality manuals set out what individual staff members (and learners) should be doing at each stage of the process. The best manuals explain why it is important to listen to learners, and give clear guidance on when and how to do so. The manuals are backed up by staff development opportunities.

It is important to build on existing resources. Many tutors and administrators already have an array of 'primary evidence' on learners' (and others') interactions with the service, for example statistical analyses of numbers of telephone calls taken or a daybook recording views. Encourage staff to ask one question a day – eg 'how did you hear about the service?' or 'what did you think of the brochure?' – and record responses.

Staff development could focus on looking at all the processes from a learner's perspective.

Staff in other departments or organisations may also be able to help. They may have better communication than you with the target group, perhaps in terms of language, an established culture of trust or shared values. Team up with community development workers to get feedback on your service from people in areas of low participation, for example. Working with health professionals can lead to new provision and funding opportunities. Capitalise on the mutual interest across departments and organisations in engaging people in learning.

The tutor in the classroom is well placed to listen to existing learners as a part of the learning process. Feedback should be planned for and recorded in a way that is appropriate to the course and can involve visual as well as written formats. Information technology courses might use an electronic voting system at the end of each session to influence the content of the next session, for example. Learners in residential or intensive education may participate in an introductory 'learning styles' workshop, so that the appropriate teaching techniques are subsequently used. This means of listening, allowing more 'reflective' learners to have more free time to absorb learning at their own pace, can affect retention.

Learners

To communicate with learners, and encourage their involvement, staff must understand the language and the culture of the learner. Staff need general communication skills and sometimes specific ones, such as:

- languages other than English
- Makaton or other systems designed for adults with learning difficulties
- British Sign Language.

Communication may be influenced by the age, gender or perceived social class of the member of staff. For this reason some providers have trained other learners to obtain feedback and views from their peers. Such schemes have sometimes been run as widening participation courses in themselves and have an impact on community activism and personal development as well as needs analysis or evaluation. In fact, the best approaches do not separate the processes at all.

Providers may establish an 'entitlement' (see the section on 'Setting standards' under 'Learning effectively', above) as part of a quality policy published for learners. Versions of this may be adapted to meet the needs of specific groups. Once people are aware of their right to be involved, they are more likely to use it. *Our right to learn* (Jacobson 2000, 167–89), a pack aimed at adults with learning difficulties, defines an 'entitlement' in a way that is readily accessible by learners.

The community

You can use similar methods for involving the community. The best method is to work with existing community groups, such as regeneration partnerships, tenants' associations, drop-in centres and faith communities, to link a learning theme with the overall context of their work.

It is important to build on existing expertise in the community. Some providers have commissioned community groups to canvass the views of those they come into contact with. This can create a 'win-win-win' situation:

- the provider obtains evidence and can create strategies to recruit more learners
- the potential learner is more likely to find a course to suit his or her needs
- the community group receives additional funding to engage in an activity that complements its core work.

Some ACL providers have worked alongside partners in the area (eg within local learning partnerships) to survey learners' and non-learners' views across a geographical area.

Seeing results

Whatever the outcome of seeking feedback from learners or the community in general, all parties – including staff – need to see their efforts lead to something.

This is not the same as saying: feedback must lead to change. That is not true. Feedback may tell the provider not to change approaches or curricula. The provider may not be able to address an issue because it is too expensive or it is a low priority, for example complaints about lack of car-parking space.

Once you have fed back to the learner, there are three more things that you can do:

- ask for views on the proposed actions
- ask what else could have been done
- thank people for their involvement.

If listening to learners is about ownership, then the views of learner and the community need to be returned to them.

Summary

The process of listening to learners needs to involve, and be owned by, its contributors: staff, learners and the wider community.

Key points

1. **Your reputation is 'owned' by your customers: staff, learners and the community.**
2. **Involve staff by communicating clearly the reasons for listening to learners: why, what for, when and how.**
3. **Share staff and resources with other organisations to listen to learners.**
4. **Involve community groups to create a 'win-win-win' situation.**
5. **Feed back to learners what you have done and what you intend to do.**

Appendix 1 Listening frameworks

Quality framework	Listening to learners
Charter Mark	'This is about consulting and involving users, staff and the wider community about how services can be improved and then effecting improvements' (DETR 2000, 17). More specifically, the Charter Mark provides a framework for a variety of techniques and approaches. This approach is about planning to get feedback, and assessing the cost and the impact of listening to service users.
EFQM Excellence Model	The model's 'results' criteria focus on what the organisation achieves. It looks at 'people results' (staff), 'performance results', 'society results' and 'customer results'. 'Customer results' can also be used to meet the requirement in Best Value to measure user and citizen satisfaction. This does not mean it meets all the requirements of 'consultation'. (See DETR 2000, 14.)
Investors in People	This model emphasises the role of staff within the organisation. The key role of front-line staff affects the quality of feedback received from learners and whether the organisation is perceived as open to suggestions. However, getting feedback from customers is not a key element of the scheme.

Quality framework	Listening to learners
ISO 9000	This model and preparation for assessment allows managers to think clearly and consistently about key business elements across their organisations. One of these is the key question: 'What do your customers want?' Applying this model systematically means that customer requirements are divided into two categories: 'defined' and 'implied'. The first is broken down into a detailed analysis of the product or service; the second is about the 'overall perception of [the service] in the eyes of [the] customers'. This leads into the key area of customer service as part of the product being offered. Many in the education and training sector may feel uncomfortable with the terminology of 'requirements analysis', but the model does apply a useful way of looking clearly and logically at the process of interacting with learners. (See Munro-Faure et al. 1993, 17–18.)
PQASSO	This framework gives explicit examples of evidence and stresses the importance of involvement at all stages of the operation, including the process of user involvement itself. The importance of acting on feedback and then communicating this to learners is highlighted. Record-keeping is given due emphasis, as is the link into strategic and operational plans. User and staff involvement is mentioned in a number of sections of the framework and is not isolated as just one part of the quality system.

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Further information

Guides on consultation

Audit Commission. *Listen up! Effective community consultation.* Audit Commission, 1999.

Cabinet Office. *Getting it together: a guide to quality schemes and the delivery of public services.* Cabinet Office, 2001.

Service First Unit, Cabinet Office. *How to consult your users: an introductory guide.* Cabinet Office, 1998.

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Useful websites

Adult Learning Inspectorate
www.ali.gov.uk

Best Value (general information)
www.ideabestvalue.net

Government's *Service first guide: how to consult your users*
www.cabine[illegible]k/servicefirst/1998/

Learning and Skills Council
www.lsc.gov.uk

adult and community learning
quality support programme

The 'satisfied customer' is central to success in both the public and private sectors. Customers of adult and community learning (ACL) providers include staff and learners, potential learners, funding agencies, local communities, employers, and the public. To improve the quality of the service they offer, ACL providers must listen to all these groups and act upon what they hear.

This booklet is a practical guide for ACL providers on how to get the most out of the listening process. It defines who learners are, explains how to listen to them effectively, describes different approaches and frameworks, and sets out how to involve staff, learners and the community.

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